

# The Idea of Vocation

*Jesuit colleges and universities are helping students and staff explore “the call”*

by Carol Schuck Scheiber

ERICA GRAF



Boston College students Nathan Ingram (foreground) and Tom McDonald are journaling during a “Halftime” retreat in Vermont, sponsored by BC’s Lilly-funded Intersections program. It’s a time for students to reflect on their talents, accomplishments, friendships, and, most important, their future.

**T**HANKS to well-funded initiatives, students, faculty, and staff at eight Jesuit colleges and universities are repackaging the idea of vocation. They are taking the notion of having a “calling” out of its musty Catholic storehouse and reclaiming it with a deeper, broader, and, yes, even hipper understanding.

“People used to be freaked out by the ‘call’ God-talk,” said Nora Murphy, a campus minister at Loyola University Chicago, whose Evoke program promotes a sense of vocation. “You know, I’d get a phone call, ‘We have another one who says she’s being called. Can you deal with her?’ Now, there’s a real understanding of the concept. Evoke has helped to demystify the language so that it’s no longer ‘creepy’—you know, ‘God is speaking’—and is far more accessible and acceptable.”

Evoke is just one of several multifaceted programs that are getting Jesuit university students, faculty, and staff talking with each other about the big questions in life. Who am I? What are my passions? How can I use them to meet the needs of the world? These are the vocational questions presented in dozens of creative ways, pilgrimages, internships, movie-and-discussion nights, service work, retreats, and seminars among them.

Five years into their programs, these universities and colleges are finding that their efforts have had a significant impact. When participants talk about the effect of the programs on their lives, they use spiritually charged words. Over and over participants say: it challenged me, it was liberating, it gave me courage, it helped me

ask questions, it confirmed my direction, it rekindled my spirit. The outcomes of these eight ambitious vocation programs have caused their intended effects and some happy surprises as well.

### **Young adults think about ministry**

First, the intended effects. The Lilly Endowment has underwritten the programs to the tune of millions of dollars. (The schools were awarded beginning grants of approximately \$2 million each.) The intent was to do something about the dismal number of people becoming Catholic or Protestant ministers.

“For most high school kids, ministry is not even on their radar screen. There’s been a steady decline over the past 50 years,” says Gretchen Wolfram, spokesperson for the Lilly Endowment, one of the country’s largest endowments. Catholics are well aware of the priest shortage; mainstream Protestants are suffering a similar decline. In 2000, the percentage of Episcopalian ministers under age 35 was just 4 percent;

date. The idea was to reach out at three levels: getting students to think about their life callings, giving them a chance to explore Christian ministry, and helping faculty and staff become mentors for the exploration.

“We don’t expect all these kids to become ministers,” says Wolfram. “But we were also looking at having healthy congregations.” Lilly knows only a fraction of people will find themselves called to professional ministry, but the endowment hopes that by funding programs that encourage broad, conscious vocation discussions, future ministers will surface while future parishioners will be more engaged in questions of faith.

### **Making the ministry choice**

The Lilly programs have indeed helped move some students to choose lives of ministry, although every school is quick to point out that its programs are aimed at a broad view of vocation (think beyond priest, brother, or nun) and a broad view of ministry (think beyond the nonprofit world).

*“It’s impossible not to consider a religious vocation if you’re looking at your faith and looking at your life direction.”*

that now I want to look at the issues and structures that affect their lives.”

Smeland received a small stipend for working fifteen hours a week at St. Pius V Parish in St. Louis while taking classes. She helped some Afghan women form a sewing club, tutored an Afghan high school girl, and worked with immigrants who came to the parish for help.

Many other students involved in the Lilly programs say the discussions, studies, internships, and other opportunities for examining one’s purpose in life have helped them clarify career and life goals. Sometimes the direction they discern



MICHELE MILLARD

for Presbyterians, it was 7 percent.

In response, Lilly established the Program for the Theological Exploration of Vocation, or PTEV. In fall 2000, the program began funding a group of church-affiliated liberal arts institutions—including two Jesuit schools—to ratchet up the attention being paid to vocation. Eighty-eight institutions have been funded to

For Saint Louis University student Jamie Smeland, an internship through the school’s VOICES program clarified her career goal of ministering to immigrants and refugees.

“I got a good sense of being a minister on a daily basis,” says Smeland. “I absolutely loved working with immigrants and refugees . . . It helped me to see

Creighton University sophomores gather at the Benedictine Retreat Center in Schuyler, Nebraska, at the start of their Cortina Experience, a facet of the school’s Lilly-funded vocation program. Sharing a floor of a residence hall and taking part in service projects will be among their experiences.



Santa Clara University's Discover program students Alexandra Goldberg and Katie Fier took part in a service trip to New Orleans in January, helping Catholic Charities gut flood-damaged homes of the elderly. Other "tools" the program employs to help students, faculty, and staff in vocation discernment include mentoring and ministry internships.

firmation candidates and cracking jokes with the girls on the basketball team he coached. Every two weeks he met with Susan Mountin, Manresa's director, to discuss what he was doing and what it meant for his life direction.

"I had to ask myself tough questions," says Shelton.

But at the end of his Manresa Scholar year, he embraced a priestly vocation with a little more life experience and self-knowledge.

### Know thyself

Self-knowledge—in the context of life's meaning and purpose—is one of the major goals of the Lilly programs. At Fairfield University in Fairfield, Connecticut, the Ignatian Residential College (IRC) brings together some 200 sophomores a year to live in community. They take certain courses together and have opportunities for lectures, discussions, worship, and service. Alums of the college can rattle off with ease the three questions that permeate the year's activities: Who am I? Whose am I? Who am I called to be?

"You learn a lot about yourself from significant interaction with peers," says Fr. James Mayzik, SJ, IRC's director. "We put a huge emphasis on that. Providing space where you can have these kinds of conversations [about the three questions] is important. As a result they are enlarged in self-understanding."

### Faculty, staff included

Students are not the only ones affected. All programs have vocation programming aimed specifically at faculty and staff. And the enthusiastic response from many of them has been gratifying for the program directors.

Michelle Evers Warren says she found the vocational self-examination of Creighton's Cardoner program helpful in her own life. "It's given me a lot of food for thought," says the assistant professor of Spanish, who attended a two-day workshop for faculty who received grants for an academic project with a vocational theme.

Warren says the program helped her in another way, too. "This has given me better tools to articulate faith and talk to

takes them to a convent or seminary. One Marquette student put it this way: "It's impossible not to consider a religious vocation if you're looking at your faith and looking at your life direction."

Paul Shelton, SJ, credits Marquette's Manresa Scholar program with helping him sort out his vocation. As he approached graduation, he knew he wanted to be a priest who worked with the poor. "I came up with this crazy idea of going to L.A. and living with the poor and seeing where it led. I was telling a friend about it, and she said, 'You know, P.J., there's a program giving out scholarships to do ministry in Milwaukee and meet with a group to talk about justice and discuss your vocation.' I looked at her incredulously and said, 'OK.'" He met with a Manresa staffer, rushed in an application, and was accepted into the first year of the Manresa Scholar program.

Shelton worked part-time at a parish in a Milwaukee suburb for a year while continuing studies. At the parish he focused on youth—preparing con-

### Lilly-funded programs at Jesuit institutions

#### **Boston College**

*Intersections*

[www.bc.edu/bc\\_org/uvp/mismin/intersec](http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/uvp/mismin/intersec)

#### **Creighton University**

*Cardoner*

[www.creighton.edu/cardoner](http://www.creighton.edu/cardoner)

#### **Fairfield University**

*Ignatian Residential College*

[www.fairfield.edu/irc.xml](http://www.fairfield.edu/irc.xml)

#### **The College of the Holy Cross**

*Lilly Vocation Discernment Initiative*

<http://college.holycross.edu/grants/lilly>

#### **Loyola University Chicago**

*Evoke*

[www.luc.edu/orgs/evoke](http://www.luc.edu/orgs/evoke)

#### **Marquette University**

*Manresa Project*

[www.marquette.edu/manresa](http://www.marquette.edu/manresa)

#### **Saint Louis University**

*VOICES*

[www.slu.edu/centers/voices](http://www.slu.edu/centers/voices)

#### **Santa Clara University**

*Discover*

[www.scu.edu/discover](http://www.scu.edu/discover)

students about faith issues. The academic and spiritual are not so schizophrenic now.”

In fact, the program has given the many students, faculty, and staff who are non-Catholic or whose faith affiliation amounts to “Well, I was raised Catholic . . .” a chance to explore spiritual questions. “How do you find a way to talk about aspects of the spiritual without negating our Catholic tradition but at the same time reaching out to all?” asks Santa Clara’s David DeCosse, director of the Campus Ethics Programs. “I think the language of vocation allows us to invite everyone into contemplative reflection oriented toward service and justice.”

### Surprise results

Certainly the Lilly vocation initiatives at the Jesuit schools have brought about the intended effects. Many conversations about life’s meaning and purpose are taking place; plenty of self-examination is happening, and many people are exploring ministry as a life choice. At the same time, the Lilly programs have also unleashed a happy series of unplanned effects. Students, faculty, and staff report that collegiality and community have increased. Many individuals tell of profound personal growth that has changed their lives—not their chosen life paths so much as the way they live. The word “courage” is brought up again and again, and so is a sense of trying to live more consciously, to “stop and smell the roses,”



Manresa staffer Dionne Eastmo and Manresa Scholar Lora Helm talk up Marquette University’s Lilly-funded Manresa Program at a student festival. The program offers scholarships to students contemplating professional Church ministries.

to take time for friendship and caring. Furthermore, faculty and staff say that the grants have helped make Jesuit universities more Jesuit.

“For me, it was a coming back to basics, a coming home to my own roots,” says Vidalino Raatior, a program coordinator at the Study Abroad Office at Santa Clara University. Raatior engaged

in Santa Clara’s Discover program in several ways, the most significant being a vocation seminar for faculty and staff. “Every day I’d come home and my wife and I would go through the discussion questions and reflect on them in our own lives, making sense of our own mission at Santa Clara.”

Ironically, the seminar gave Raatior the courage to resign from his position with the university. He and his wife spent a year as volunteer administrators at a Jesuit high school in Micronesia, the same one from which Raatior had graduated. The homecoming helped Raatior to wed the American half and the Micronesian half of his life as well as his lay half and his Jesuit half (a former Jesuit, he has great

“You learn a lot about yourself from significant interaction with peers,” says Fr. James Mayzik, SJ, director of Fairfield University’s Ignatian Residential College. Its students live in community, work on service projects, and take some classes together.



JEAN SANTOPATRE

affection for the order).

“The rewards were immense,” says Raattior, who then returned to Santa Clara after the year and is once again an enthusiastic Discover participant.

### More than collegiality

The collegiality of the vocation seminars and discussion groups has also been a boon for many faculty and staff. It’s one of the few opportunities for them to gather outside the boundaries of their own departments. In addition, everyone gathers as equals. William Honig, associate professor of computer science at Loyola, still remembers the day he showed up for a vocation seminar as a new hire.

“It was a cold, gloomy day, with maybe fifteen people in the audience. And now some of those people have become my close personal friends. It set me on a path at the university, allowing me to develop a more interactive, collaborative style of working together with others.”

The Lilly Endowment might not have planned to energize the Jesuit character of these eight schools, but it has. The moment was ripe for invigorating the Ignatian spirit at Boston College when the Lilly vocation initiative was launched in 2001.

“There was a sense on campus that



STEVE ROOT

Faculty involvement is an integral part of Lilly programs at Jesuit schools; Saint Louis University’s Alexandria Society, sponsored by the VOICES program, meets twice a month for dinner (pizza this time) and discussion about the intersection of faith and philosophy.

this was needed before the Lilly grant came along,” says Burt Howell, director of Boston College’s Intersections program. “The Jesuit tradition is so rich with ways and ideas for vocation discernment . . . so when Lilly provided a structure and the finances for these programs, they took off.”

Most of the universities have already received continued financing, which required them to institutionalize their

vocation programming. Thus the vocation efforts should live on beyond the eight-year funding cycle. After all, the questions they bring up are also ongoing, persisting across a lifetime, going to the heart of who we are and how we love God. The questions are put before us time and again during our lives as commitments change and circumstances shift.

The Lilly-funded programs have spurred many people to begin a lifelong quest. Dan Musser, a Holy Cross Lilly summer intern, put it well in one of his reflection papers: “Perhaps one of the most valuable characteristics of the sincere discernment process is its stubborn persistence . . . I can’t believe that for any person serious about her or his spiritual development that the discernment process ever really concludes.” **C**



JOE EARLEY

Loyola University Chicago students enjoy music and fellowship in addition to activities such as pumpkin carving at “Evoke Jam” on the school’s lakefront campus. The event’s speakers and workshops fill them in on Loyola’s Lilly-funded Evoke program and its offerings of alternative break immersion trips, retreats, and faculty mentoring.



Writer and editor Carol Schuck Scheiber focuses on social and religious issues. She is editor of *Vision*, *Horizon*, and *Focus on Vocation Ministry*, publications of the National Religious Vocation Conference.